

“If I am I because you are you, and if you are you because I am I,  
then I am not I and you are not you”

Alan Watts (1966, p. 118)

## **Introduction**

Ideas about identity have a comparatively long and diverse history that contemporary management and organization studies (MOS) ignore at their peril, and a principal aim of this article is to examine some of the implications of doing so. One implication is the tendency for a perpetual reinvention of the wheel, and invariably one that is expected to run on the firm foundations of a clear and smooth road ahead. In matters of identity, however, paths are strewn with debris, roads full of potholes, numerous back streets turn into blind alleys and often there is not even a road on which to travel or a destination that is anything more than ephemeral. Staying with the same metaphor, the literature on identity in MOS often seems blinded by the oncoming headlights, thus losing the capacity to look back at what has gone before or sideways to alternative literatures.

It may be argued that the paradox of identity is that it involves us simultaneously being ‘different from everyone else’ and yet ‘the same as others’ with whom we identify (Pullen, 2007, p. 1). It is then a desire to be unique, distinctive and different at one and the same time as a concern to identify with a particular doctrine, set of ideas, faction, gender, race, organization, culture, nation, etc. Matters of a discrete and singular identity would appear to safeguard against domination, but notions of the autonomous self have been described as illusory (Watts, 1951; Haraway, 1991; Braidotti, 2013). Such ideas derive from enlightenment and humanistic philosophies that in recent time have been deployed and elaborated by neo-liberal governmental strategies, transforming individuals into self-

disciplined, autonomous subjects through prevailing exercises of power (Foucault, 1982; McCabe, 2009; Mangan, 2009). To a large extent, this self-discipline is part of what it means for subjects to secure meaning and identity through engaging in the practices that power invokes (Knights, 2002), however self-defeating. Self-defeating in the sense of presuming that meaning and identity can be stabilised, when by virtue of its construction, identity is inherently precarious and ephemeral because of its dependence on the unpredictable and uncontrollable social confirmation of others. Nonetheless, the enlightenment idea of an autonomous self tends to fuel the myth that identity can be secured, for example, through climbing the hierarchies of fame and fortune represented by the inequalities of material and symbolic wealth. In falling for this illusion of a fully autonomous self, we readily take identity for granted as a real and achievable goal for stabilizing meaning and reality, obscuring how it is partly an effect of exercises of power that constitute us, as this or that kind of subject (Foucault, 1982). Of course, power/knowledge effects on subjectivity do not remove the agency of subjects to mediate, interpret, negotiate and resist the meanings and relations surrounding their (our) subjection. Indeed, the very ethics and aesthetics of subjectivity arise from our (their) refusal to be what we (they) have become historically through so many exercises of power (Foucault, 2011). However, this involves risks since the presumed potential stability of identity is threatened by challenging its constitution through power. Consequently, in everyday life we often avoid such uncomfortable questions, and yet while it might be expected otherwise, so do many contemporary theorists of identity.

One argument of this article is that this occurs partly because of a contemporary amnesia and myopia where there can be a lack of concern to look either backwards or sideways, such that the peripheral vision potentially afforded by the past and other disciplines is lost, or rendered invisible in management and organization studies of identity. It partly results from a pessimism about the future that involves ‘a narcissistic inability to identify with posterity’ ... or to be part of ... ‘a historical

stream' (Lasch, 1979, p. 102). A further consequence of this condition is a limitation of vision that might enable studies to fulfil their future 'analytical promise' (Brown, 2015, p.20), so our title 'Pushing the boundaries of amnesia and myopia' is intended to be provocative in alerting us to the possibility that past, and a more diverse range of present literatures may enable us to develop analyses that go beyond common sense understandings. For by treating it as little more than a resource for security, we forget that identity is routinely dependent on unpredictable and often impetuous 'others' for confirmation of its claim to validity.

In this article, we attempt to reinvigorate what we see as an interrogation of identity that is limited by these tendencies towards amnesia and myopia. Our critical reflections then explore alternative relationships with others that might transcend everyday preoccupations with, and attachment to, identity. These have the potential to challenge and interrogate our tendencies to take identity for granted, to disrupt assumptions that it offers stability and security and instead to simply acknowledge that our embodied and ethical relationships with one another need not be just about *us*. To clarify, we are not questioning the prevalent centrality of identity as an everyday concern, but rather the sense in which researchers fail to question or investigate individuals' subjective attachments to it and how this reproduces the narcissism of contemporary life whether at work or in society more generally.

The remainder of this paper begins with a summary of our methodology, which departs from those approaches that caught within the legacy of positivism attempt to legitimize their research through quasi-representative claims. We instead do not apologize for our critical hermeneutic and interpretative approach and therefore eschew the very idea of representationalism. We then turn to what we consider to be important historical contributions to analyses of identity, and a discussion of literature that is not just located either within MOS or focused exclusively on the concept of 'identity, when associated terms such as self and subjectivity are equally preoccupied with its concerns. We then

compare this with some contemporary MOS literature to show how the myopia and amnesia of neglecting sources of a broader nature has resulted in academic analyses reflecting and reproducing everyday preoccupations with, rather than challenges to, identity. By challenging these preoccupations, we can generate more embodied and engaged understandings of social relations that displace the narcissism associated with identity. For reasons of space we limit our analysis of identity in MOS primarily to issues of a historical, disciplinary, gender and bodily nature. Finally, we summarise the arguments before examining the implications of the analysis and its potential contribution for future studies.

## **Methodology**

In considering our approach to writing this article, we were acutely aware that ‘making coherent sense of this increasingly vast, heterogeneous and fragmented literature is a daunting task’ (Brown, 2015, p.23). We began by emulating the process that Brown (2015, p.21) had adopted of identifying relevant articles by searching Thompson Reuters Web of Knowledge. However, our searches threw up different literatures and it became clear that ultimately the choice depended quite substantially, if not arbitrarily, on the researcher’s own interpretations, for even if we subscribed to traditional notions of ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ these are predicated on ‘replicability’, which clearly failed to materialize in this case. Consequently, we are sympathetic to the view that to ‘produce the definitive’ identity literature review is an ‘impossible task’ (duGay and Evans, 2000, p.2), as well as a misplaced aspiration, due to the extensiveness and disparity of the literature. Instead, we decided to follow a more interventionist approach of selecting the literatures to examine in relation to particular themes, through which our contribution was being organized. Since knowledge is situated, contextual and indexical, multiple interpretations of texts are always possible, and so ours is *no more than one interpretation* of the

identity literature in MOS, rather than any objective attempt to position ourselves as arbitrators of what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘bad’. However, we argue that this is one way of challenging the assumption that because identity is so all-pervasive, it is not in need of questioning or interrogating.

To elaborate, this review reflects a methodological stance that is more consistent with our deconstructivist and anti-positivist epistemology and its ‘ontological questions’ and implications (Wolfe, 2012, p.31). We feel strongly that the requirements to present accounts of research in a particular way constrain studies that do not fit, or are even deliberately opposed to, positivist paradigms. As such, social science also suffers from a degree of methodological tunnel vision because frequently data, whether directly empirical or materials derived from the literature, are presented in a detached and formalistic manner, as if they are independent of the researcher’s embodied experience or underlying concerns (Knights, 2015). This is even more absurd in researcher accounts that go on to challenge the belief that ‘objects’ can be accurately represented. To conceal one’s concerns or embodied experiences behind this myth of ‘independence’ and ‘objectivity’ is, in our view, disingenuous and rather less rigorous than allowing the reader to see what is really driving the selection and analysis of the data. As researchers, we are *not*, and never can be, separate from the ‘objects’ researched, and therefore any attempt to disentangle how our mutually constituted practices are enacted is impossible (Mol, 2002).

As we subscribe to this critique of a positivism that remains prevalent in establishment social science (e.g. Yin, 2008), we commend, rather than apologize for, our constructivist and interpretive approach. Having said this, we do not subscribe to a relativist methodology where ‘anything goes’ but rather our selection of literature is designed not only to support, but also to *challenge* the arguments we make about amnesia and myopia. Of course, we eschew any attempt or claim to be exhaustive for this is just another feature of the representational paradigm and especially its heavily masculine

exemplifications (Clough, 1992). However, we do intersperse our analysis with contemporary examples of past and present literature partly to endorse the breach of arbitrary historical boundaries that are indispensable to writing a history of the present (Foucault, 1979). In addition, our approach accepts Spinoza's invitation to all 'in the social, to *really be there*' (Negri, 2013, p. 95, our emphasis), where this implies a fully embodied and engaged presence, not a detached and narrow, cognitively controlled observation from a 'safe distance'. This has the methodological implication that we be passionately and bodily engaged with our research subject(s) whether texts or other bodies. We have articulated our methodological deliberations<sup>i</sup> in the expectation that they may help legitimise similar attempts by other scholars to avoid the sedimented views of what is considered 'rigorous' and 'robust', especially when they contradict the author's more general epistemology and ontology, a problem that 'all writers who wish to contribute to this field must either struggle with or against' (Bell and Bryman, 2011, p.706).

We agree that 'the fields of identity theory and organizational theory are huge' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p.1166). Instead we chose to follow the 'less daunting' and more feasible strategy adopted by du Gay and Evans (2000), which was to 'track specific themes, debates or positions...rather than attempt to map the field' (p.2). As such, our choice of literature is focused around problematizing studies of identity in the organizational and management field, insofar as they often present identity in a disembodied, ahistorical, and taken-for-granted way that tends to reflect, rather than challenge, notions of instrumental individualism. However, we have also been careful to refer to some of the exceptions to these amnesic and myopic tendencies in the literature.

This led us to present our literature review in terms of three tendencies; firstly, by failing to trace the genealogy of the concept of identity and self /subjectivity back to earlier theorists, some contemporary literature displays a form of retrograde<sup>ii</sup> amnesia that often results in a perpetual

*reinvention of the wheel*. Secondly, this amnesia regarding its historicity has been combined with a tendency to be myopic with regard to problems of taking identity for granted, as a given, rather than interrogating its conditions and consequences, and this we have characterised as being *blinded by the headlights*. Thirdly, we explore and challenge how identity has come to be constituted as a disembodied phenomenon, largely through the dominant discursive, linguistic and often masculine narratives surrounding it. Were we to be *driven by the body* a little more, we might be less likely to suffer from amnesia and myopia or to reinvent the wheel and be blinded by the headlights. We need also to remember that “driving” is an embodied practice and when seeking to reach a defined destination we may not just be blinded by the oncoming headlights, but also often by unrealistic masculine expectations and demands upon our bodies. We liken this to research that is blind to how attempts to secure the self through identity might become the symbolic equivalent of a disastrous road accident caused by tiredness. What we want to encourage by our analysis, then, is a more fully embodied and ethically engaged understanding of social relations that would counter the individualistic preoccupation with, and attachment to, identity as a futile and often self-defeating means of rendering the self stable and secure. For it has been argued that such ‘avoidance of impermanence’ and ‘the tendency to conform, to normalize, to secure and control’ is the pathway to, if not already the terminal of, a destructive technocratic ‘nihilism’ (Levin, 1985:74). Levin reaches this conclusion through his analysis of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty who sought to resist this nihilism that, transfixed by cognitively, masculine disembodied rationality, goes comparatively unchallenged in modern society.

Of course, as one of our reviewers reminded us, not all scholars fail to consult ideas and literature from the past or from other disciplines (e.g. Knights and Willmott, 1985; 1989; 1999/2004; Casey, 1995; Kondo, 1990; Collinson, 2003; Roberts, 2005; Beech, 2008; Simpson and Carroll, 2008;

Reedy, 2009; Lok and Willmott, 2014; Knights and Clarke, 2014), and these may thereby transcend ‘artificial categories’ between the old that is forgotten, or neglected, and the wider or not-yet-realized understandings that are currently beyond our vision. If we view such scholars as embodying our metaphor by continually working to improve their craft, rather than just reinventing the same wheel, we assume they are immersed in the tradition and culture of ideas, engaging in significant enactments of practice, and contribution to the field, and as such are less likely to be blinded by the headlights. That is, we presume they do not start from scratch each time, suffer from amnesia by forgetting what has gone before, or neglect to look sideways, but rather they refine their previous ideas and historical foundations while also continuing to experiment and develop new ideas.

### **Re-inventing the Wheel?**

Our concern is that historical, multidisciplinary and different terminologies in the analysis of identity have sometimes been neglected in recent studies, resulting not only in a glossing over of important insights, but also a continual reinvention of the wheel, albeit not one well designed for the road ahead. The amnesia might be partly grounded in the false belief that ‘history begins with the primitive and backward, the weak and the helpless’ (Heidegger, 1961, p. 130). In contrast we seek to illustrate how there is a wealth of literature about the self from the past that, if consulted, would oil the wheels of research so as to render it more sensitive to the slippery surface of its journey, and help challenge the laudatory veil that surrounds identity. In the everyday world, identity would seem as sacrosanct as human life itself but we might expect academics to at least subject this notion to critical interrogation, yet too often this is not the case, and neither are earlier literatures always mined sufficiently. For example, in this same journal a review of identity in organizations (Brown, 2015), while possibly one of the least amnesic and myopic contributions, ignores authors such as Becker (1969; 1973) and Watts



(1951; 1973) who seriously problematize identity as a resource for security. This is one illustration of how the myopia of remaining locked into a single sub-discipline such as MOS is risky, for it can prevent analysis from building on previous insights, for example, some earlier theorists regard identity pursuits primarily as self-defeating attempts to escape insecurity (Watts, 1973), or an effort to make life meaningful (Becker, 1969). Moreover, these omissions can also obfuscate in many ways: for example, the inevitability of death and decay; the facilitation of tendencies to reproduce the anthropocentric deceit (and conceit) that we control our lives, ‘act’ as ‘willful and free individual[s]’, or have a ‘unique and self-fashioned identity’ that enables us all to be ‘*somebody*’ (Becker, 1973, p.55). These oversights, we argue, can ‘inhibit learning’ (Klein, 1997, p.9) and are also symptomatic of amnesia, a way of defoliating or even effacing memory.

This does not mean that we subscribe to a view of history as some absolute truth, for ‘the past ... is always understood in the context of the concerns of the present’ (Miller, 1993, p.32; Case et al. 2011, p. 246), so that we are for ever engaged in a ‘history of the present’ (Foucault, 1979), seeking to explore the historical conditions of what made it possible for us to be represented in this particular way. Consequently, history cannot be ‘read off’ independently of current concerns, as Wittgenstein (1958) made clear in speaking about indexicality, for the meaning of any concept is tied to the context of its use, and thus to our present anxieties and preoccupations. By the same token, we do not advocate unadulterated eclecticism since that leads only to relativism that is bereft of a position or point of view (Bernstein, 1998).

Drawing on a narrow semantic interpretation, Moran (2015) argues that in its present form, identity did not actually ‘exist’ until the 1960s. We accept that prior to this period there was not the same intensity and level of attention given to the preoccupation with identity concerning one’s own self-image, and this actual term, as opposed to what it implied, had not yet entered everyday

consciousness. However, philosophically the meaning lying behind the concept of identity can be traced back at least as far as Hegel (1807/1977) who developed a theory of the dialectics of recognition as the fundamental grounds of the formation of self, and it is difficult not to agree with Hegel that without social recognition a ‘person’s sense of identity can be utterly destroyed’ (Singer, 2001, p. 78).

Even though we need not dwell too much on Hegel, it is impossible to deny the genesis of ideas about identity in Mead’s (1934) articulation of how the active subject (‘I’), the target (‘me’) and the social frame (‘generalized other’) of its action combine to form a self or identity through regular and routine, co-constituted social interactions. Identity, then, is the unending and recursive perceptions of others’ perceptions of the self, and the identities of others are constituted through exactly the same processes but Mead’s (ibid: 56) concern with consequences leads him to see the meaning of symbols as fixed and universal across interactions and so he does not explore ‘ambiguity, vagueness, uncertainty, or even lying in communication’ (Psathas, 2014, p. 28) even though these are implicit in his analysis of the self, and one important way in which identity is rendered precarious. So, every presentation we make is some kind of claim to, although never a guarantee of, a particular identity (Goffman, 1959; 1967), but these are ordinarily proxies for a wider symbolic order in that they reflect and reproduce as well as challenge and re-construct the broader social and cultural norms. In this sense, identity is subject to confirmation, indifference or denial in everyday interpersonal interactions that are social rather than psychological in both their genesis and their outcomes. For identities only exist when they are interacting<sup>iii</sup> such that the relationship between conceptions of a seemingly discrete ‘self’ and wider ‘society’ is rather an unrelenting, inter and intra-dependent, co-constituting phenomenon (Barad, 2007).

In working with Mead’s ideas and the succeeding symbolic-interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969; Manis and Meltzer, 1967; Meltzer, et al., 1975), we are less likely to take identity for granted since its ephemeral quality strikes us at every turn, which has its parallel in physics where it is argued

‘that the world is a continuous, restless swarming of things; a continuous coming to light and disappearance of ephemeral entities’ (Rovelli, 2014: 31). However, like many theoretical perspectives symbolic interactionism has limitations. Firstly, it has little to say about the historic conditions that serve as both a medium and an outcome of any interpretive process, rendering it open to accusations of being contextually and politically naive. Secondly, it tends to treat individuals as strangely disembodied constructing them in Cartesian terms as cognitively privileged, whereby bodily desires and feelings are readily colonized by the mind. In addition, Mead’s ‘Generalized Other’ is conceptualised as oddly unitarist, thereby indicating that individuals strive for some kind of coherence and stability in relation to an apparently singular ideal, which cannot be other than a fantasy (see Brown, this issue).

Although it has been argued that symbolic interactionism exaggerates the autonomy of the subject in ways that can be self-defeating (Knights and Willmott, 1999/2004), this is not a necessary consequence of the theory (see Brown, this issue). For example, many have taken on board the fragility of identity due to its recursively constructed nature but have avoided any attachment to individual autonomy that is its mirror image. Instead, authors such as Becker (1969; 1973) and Watts (1951; 1966; 1973) speak about the self-contradictory nature of attachments to identity since the self is always fragile and vulnerable to implosion, especially when others fail to provide the necessary social confirmations to hold it in place. This lack of validation can happen in a moment, and at any moment. Becker (1973) believed these preoccupations were a ‘vital lie...a *necessary* and basic dishonesty about oneself and one’s whole situation’ (p.55), a means of allaying imminent death that is ultimately self-defeating, since the body of every human being is vulnerable to mortality. However, the *symbolic* constitution of the self is threatened even more explicitly and frequently through its dependence on the fickle, and unpredictable other(s), for the social confirmations that it craves,

If I want to be secure, that is, protected from the flux of life, I am wanting to be separate from life. Yet it is this very sense of separateness, which makes me feel insecure (Watts, 1951, p.77)

So it is precisely this self-defeating craving and associated preoccupation with the self that we believe is a product of enlightenment discourse and subject-object binary thinking, whereby the body and affect are subordinated to the mind and cognition (Knights, 2015). While this binary served as the conditions of possibility for the social scientific study of human existence (Foucault, 1973), it also made possible and legitimized the preoccupation that modern humans have with their identity (Becker, 1969). But this preoccupation reflects and reinforces an anxiety and insecurity that accompanies a misrecognition and solidification of self as stable and separate from the world, which is challenged not only in psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1980) but also in the physical sciences and humanities (Barad, 2007; Grosz, 1994; Braidotti, 2011).

As we have implied, there are both positive and negative aspects to the sense of subject-object separation, positive in the sense that it stimulates us to be active and creative in the belief that, even if anxiety cannot be eradicated, active commitments will at least divert our attention from the morbidity of thinking about our separation as ultimately one of finitude (Sartre, 2004), but negative as those very projects designed to alleviate the anxiety of separation frequently exacerbate and thereby reproduce it. This is because social confirmations of the self are transient and precarious, so in need of constant re-affirmation and renewal, and never guaranteed.

Other 20<sup>th</sup> Century theorists have critically examined ideas of the autonomous self (Skinner, 1971), arguing that ‘free will’ is illusory since human behaviour is simply a predictable response to stimuli, where any unexpected deviations can be attributed to as-yet unidentified stimuli. For Skinner, notions of autonomy are misplaced forms of flattery, and fantastical notions of choice and discretion,

merely derived from our attempts to ‘control, subdue or manage the forces of nature in society’ as well as ‘a comforting belief in our own wilful capacity to determine our own fate’ (Knights and Willmott, 2004, p.64). In this case, identity cannot be taken for granted, for it has little place in theorising human action because in removing the ‘black box’ of thought from individuals, behaviourists eradicate any sense of human agency. While concurring to some extent with the behaviourist critique of autonomy, we cannot agree that human beings are devoid of agentic power, for they mediate their worlds through processes of constructing, challenging, and reconfiguring *meaning*. For us, embodied agency is ‘a defining characteristic of what it is to be human...a non-negotiable aspect of identity’ (Knights and Willmott, 2004, p.68).

In different ways, the psychoanalytic approach also challenges autonomy, for it is predicated on ideas of unconscious forces and desires that often leave the subject unaware, and thereby incapable of controlling their emotions, fantasies and actions. Freud (1923/2014) claimed that our ways of enacting are always a consequence of events occurring in our early lives relating to the *id* (primitive desires), the *ego* (balancing the demands of the *id* with social realism) and the *superego* (the conscience). As Lacan (2008) argues, the image of the self as an independent, solid, discrete and autonomous being is misplaced, through a process of *meconnaissance*, or misrecognition. This arises from our first encounter with a mirror image of the self that the ego mistakes for a discrete individual entity and the ‘illusion of autonomy to which it entrusts itself’ (Lacan, 1980, p.6), and which also ‘leads us to deny or forget the irretrievably social construction of the self’ (Roberts, 2005, p.637). Psychoanalysis purports to challenge ideas of a discrete self, for this leads to an over-attachment to fantasies about individual achievement and notions of perfect selves always beyond reach (Schwartz, 1987).

Later critiques, however, show how psychoanalysis can itself serve to repress subjects through reproducing processes of normalisation, by standardising a set of behaviours, from which any deviance

becomes pathological and subjected to surveillance (Foucault, 1979). Despite this, and Lacan's (1980) critique of autonomy, psychoanalysis obligates individuals to 'work' on themselves to 'correct' 'abnormalities' and reconcile repressed anxieties (Freud, 1923/2014; Jung, 1968). This not only legitimizes and reproduces fantasies of an orderly and normalized world, but also narcissistic inclinations that thrive on, rather than undermine, contemporary preoccupations with the self.

Finally, we cannot ignore the literature on existentialism that theorises the self as autonomous and discrete yet caught up in a precarious world of meaningless uncertainty and unpredictability, not least because of the finitude of existence. The primary concern then *must* be to commit ourselves to meaningful projects that shield us from the anxiety of a vacuous existential void, rather than live 'small' and insignificant lives preoccupied with mundane concerns and trivial matters that the majority of people are afforded by bourgeois existence. In Sartre's branch of existentialism, we are 'condemned to be free' (Sartre, 1957) but this enables us to bypass a life characterised by meaningless 'endeavours', and instead become dedicated to projects through which we can locate our 'true' and 'authentic' self so as to realize our potential. Since we live only briefly in an oppressively uncertain world, potentially without any meaning, we must confront our mortality to live *deliberately*,

Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is *only* not dying (de Beauvoir, 1948 p.83, our emphasis)

In order to alleviate potential existentialist insecurities, or slipping into nihilism, one must instead adopt radical individual ideas in order to render the world meaningful, and come to realise what we are 'capable of doing and overcoming' (Kierkegaard, 1967, p.40). Unfortunately, this sometimes results in our becoming blind to the oppressive and dehumanized nature of some political causes and Sartre's unwavering support for Soviet communism regardless of atrocities led to break-ups with close friends

such as Camus (Aronson, 2004) and Merleau-Ponty (O’Neil, 1998). Equally problematically, we often adopt humanist ideals of working on the self, possibly to extremes, in order to realise our seemingly ‘limitless potential’ (Glynos 2008; Costea, et al. 2012). In this sense,

The role of agency is not only significant but is laid upon us as an ethical imperative, as the only way of having a fully human existence” (Reedy, 2009, p.114)

In terms of our motoring analogy existentialists encourage us to be alert, and exercise our freedom, to ‘choose’ new territories to drive ourselves toward; destinations unknown. The exhortation to do so is deemed necessary in order to find meaning, as an attempt to avert nihilism - those empty potholes we encounter on the contingent highway of life, for the only certainty is that one day we will literally, and metaphorically, come to a ‘dead end’. However, notions that we are completely autonomous, that man (*sic*) can ‘constantly invent his own path’ (Sartre) to find meaning and security and become ‘fully human’ is ultimately self-defeating, as we, and other critics (e.g. Watts, 1951) have shown.

We have sought to suggest that because much contemporary literature on identity in MOS neglects many of these important authors from the past and within associated disciplines, they end up reinventing the wheel if only to travel on a track that seems to go around in circles without the vision left by their antecedents. One such vision deriving from Merleau-Ponty was to acknowledge that through interrogation we see much that has already been forgotten in ways that harmonize both seeing and knowing ‘in the limitless movement of desire’ (Lefort, 1974, 706). Without such vision, in the next section we argue that some contemporary theorists repeat and reproduce the same ‘ethical’ imperative to ‘be someone’, perhaps in the belief they are heading for a ‘different’ place, along the road less travelled. Partly this may be because the road names have changed, and the new vehicle ‘identity’ is

spray painted in a seemingly ‘neutral’ neo-liberal hue, and fuelled by meritocratic ideologies of successful selves.

### **Blinded by the Headlights**

With a research focus on management and organization, it might seem unnecessary to discuss earlier and broader literatures, but we argue that this neglect accepts, rather than challenges, commonsense beliefs about identity. Of course, these beliefs are themselves perpetrated through contemporary cultural and social institutions, whether it is the family and education, politics and the media, or management, work and organization. Identity, it has even been argued, may be an empty or floating signifier (Levi-Strauss, 1987, p.63; Laclau, 1996) for ‘it is precisely the non-transparency of identity...that forces us to continuously invent it’ (Giesen and Seyfert, 2016, p.114). Is this partly what leads us to construct identity as a panacea of supreme worth and a realisable goal, rather than a transient experience that secures only temporary respite from everyday anxieties and insecurities? By accepting rather than challenging this common-sense view of identity, some contemporary literature (e.g. Ybema et al., 2009; Gill, 2015) may inadvertently give it further legitimacy, so even what purports to be critical analysis can ‘somehow come to take the very project of identity for granted’ (Roberts, 2005, p.638). Also, attributions of intentionality and rationality are often conferred on identity, like a commodity to be acquired through planning and purposive action so as to assist ‘those in organizations to accomplish specific objectives or goals’ (Ainsworth and Grant, 2012, p.61).

Some authors conflate their own ideas with commonsense understandings of everyday life, such that in failing to interrogate identity we cannot always determine whether they are merely describing what lay persons are doing or projecting their own beliefs onto subjects. For example, in the statement ‘professionals may best be regarded as reflexive appropriators of organizational discourse in pursuit of



valued work objectives and preferred identities’, Brown and Lewis (2011, p.886) assume a good deal of intentionality, self-consciousness and autonomy around subjects’ desires, as well as a degree of amnesia or myopia about the *contingent* nature of identity. This occurs possibly because of an unconscious recourse to epistemological and ontological binaries, whereby subjects are seen (or see themselves) as separate autonomous entities, able to construct ‘particular’ identities by their own volition. The consequence of this is not benign, since rather than viewing identity as a web of complex entanglements the boundaries of which are fragile and fluid (Barad, 2007; see Atewologun et al., and Haslam et al., this issue), it is seen merely as a resource or ‘coping’ strategy ‘to avoid cognitive and emotive dissonance’ (Knights and Willmott, 1985, p.26). This binary thinking is reinforced by contemporary observations of the tendency to treat identity ‘as a descriptive category rather than as an analytical tool’ (Brown, 2015, p. 33). Identity studies are then in danger of becoming ‘overly myopic, introspective and detached from broader debates’ (Coupland and Brown, 2012, p.2), although we would also warn against the amnesia of neglecting earlier literatures that might serve as reminders.

An example of this appears in the well-regarded paper *Identity Matters* (Alvesson et al., 2008) where the oldest citation relating to identity is Ashforth and Mael (1989), but might we expect an editorial introduction for a Special Issue on this topic to give some attention to its genealogy? Although debating the distinction between identity as ‘a fresh take on a range of phenomena...that illuminates novel angles’ (Alvesson et al., 2008, p.6), or suggesting the possibility that it is only adopted because it ‘is currently in vogue’ (p.7) they also attempt to make sense of the disparate literature and its ‘strikingly different philosophical frameworks’ (ibid. p.8). However, the theoretical analysis appears to leapfrog historical or interdisciplinary contributions to identity. Consequently, by perhaps trying to establish an ‘ostensibly new “master signifier” among organizational scholars’ (ibid., p.6), they appear to display elements of amnesia and myopia in disregarding the insights of earlier literatures concerning

the self-defeating and contingent aspects of identity as a source of stability and security. That said, careful interrogation of this work also highlights ambiguities and ambivalence, so we wholly appreciate how the authors acknowledge the historical and culturally contrived nature of identity,

‘there is nothing natural or self-evident about concern with who we are; preoccupation is a cultural, historical formation’ ... of which ... ‘the surge of identity scholarship is part’ (2008, p.11).

Here Alvesson et al. make an insightful link concerning contemporary capitalism and the preoccupation with identity, explaining how the latter has become increasingly more prevalent in contemporary life, as well as in academic research. However, a key opportunity is missed, which is to prompt future scholars of identity to problematise, challenge, and treat with ambivalence, ideas of excessive individualism that may come to resemble ‘productive narcissism’ (Pullen and Rhodes, 2008). In short, further interrogation and theorizing concerning the self-defeating aspects of identity work might serve here as a reminder, or warning, that attempts to assert our ‘right to self-fulfillment’ (Lasch, 1979, p. 102) risk leading us to an ever-increasing vicious spiral of concern with ourselves (Costea et al., 2012).

While the paper by Alvesson et. al., (2008) is a good exemplar of how some organization studies papers may not fully interrogate identity (Hogg and Terry, 2001; Pritchard and Symon, 2011), we can explicate our arguments a little more clearly by drawing on Croft et al’s (2015) study of nurses. The study takes a traditional view of identity, constructing nurses as having ‘multiple’ identities that result in ‘an emotional attachment to their professional group identity’, which then leads to a conflict with their ‘managerial leader identity’ (p.113). Such a ‘framing’ provides opportunities for researchers to *challenge* the way that participants account for their attachment to identity, rather than reproducing it in their analysis. In short, the authors could, *but do not*, problematise how people tend to talk in ways

that reifies notions of particular ‘types’ of identity, and slice them up, such that their ‘managerial leader identity’ conflicts with a preferred ‘professional group identity’. We argue that because of the dynamic and precarious character of identity formation, where it might be better to talk of *enacting* certain practices, Croft et al (2015) assume that identity can be ‘achieved’, resembling a coherent and ‘finished’ product.

We are not in any way suggesting that all MOS literature tends to treat identity in this way, taking it as a given, for there are numerous exceptions to this charge (Knights and Willmott, 1999/2004; Casey, 1995; Collinson, 2003; Roberts, 2005; Czarniawska, 2008; Pullen and Rhodes, 2008; Ekman, 2013), among others. There are also many who do not necessarily challenge the preoccupation with identity, or critically examine its conditions and consequences, but do at least focus upon social and collective, rather than just individualistic, identity work (Mangan, 2009; McCabe, 2007; 2009; Tomkins and Eatough, 2014). That said, in the literature as well as in practice, while identity is often associated with social wellbeing, this does not necessarily preclude it from being a resource for elevating the self over 'other', for all sorts of collective projects, even those reflecting charitable aims, can be a vehicle for rendering the self stable, secure and socially valued (O'Toole and Grey, 2016a, 2016b; Weller, 2016).

Relatedly, attachments to particular (elite) institutions instead of to *the work itself*, could also be theorised, but often are not, and as an example Gill’s study of management consultants states ‘‘although it may seem paradoxical, the enhanced status and confidence that can come from employment in an elite consulting firm may lead to increased anxiety’ (2015, p.319). Earlier theorists would find this less surprising or novel, for craving membership to such institutions is the very thing that makes us insecure (Mead, 1934; Watts, 1951), not least because ‘enhanced status’ is transient, and dependent on the *continual* re-affirmations from others (Knights and Willmott, 1999/2004). To extend

academic analysis beyond the contemporary ‘lay’ treatment of identity that has become hegemonic, individual desire for status and recognition could rather be used to demonstrate how the achievement of instrumental outcomes necessarily displace more embodied engagement, when people

change focus from *what* they are doing to the fascination of being the one doing it ... hide in the limitless concerns about identity (Ekman, 2013, p.18)

Importantly, this preoccupation with self as both a condition and consequence of taking identity for granted, can also fuel a range of instrumental and individual practices that breach ethical or humanitarian norms (Schwartz, 1987; Sternberg, 2013). This is partly because society ‘gives prominence and encouragement to narcissistic traits’ (Lasch, 1979, p.xvii) where ‘success becomes the social value par excellence’ (Pullen and Rhodes, 2008, p.9). These narcissistic preoccupations preclude us from fully engaging with Others (Lasch, 1977; Sennett, 1977), closing down alternative considerations in favour of ‘individual self-fulfillment and achievement’ (Beck, 2002, p.22),

The meaning and purpose of dancing is the dance. Like music, also, it is fulfilled in each moment of its course. You do not play a sonata in order to reach the final chord (Watts, 1951, p.116)

Rather than an engagement with work for its own sake, the MOS literature sometimes uncritically reinforces individualistic success ethics, whereby identity/ identity work are viewed as a functional means of getting ahead of the game (Joecks et al., 2014). Moreover, associations with contemporary working life (career, monetary bonuses, elite positions, success) appear embedded in the pursuit of *particular* identities as a Holy Grail, rather than encouraging us to constitute, and embody ourselves in ways that do not leave us separated off from one another. After all, only a limited elite can ever (hope to) experience this transient sense of elation concerning achievement and success (Knights and Clarke,

2014). Meanwhile, failure is individualised as a responsibility to oneself (Bauman, 2008, p.107, Sennett and Cobb, 1977, Newton, 1995), obliging, even compelling us to ‘work’ on ourselves as individual projects (Grey, 1994).

Instrumentalism has been at least partially problematized in the MOS literature insofar as there is a proliferation of articles dealing with the attempted exercise of power, and the control/regulation of identities (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Kuhn, 2009; Brown and Lewis, 2011). However, most studies never question identity per se, partly because we have naturalized the idea that identity is and *should* be of central concern, enabling organizations to colonise selves (whether as workers or customers) through a variety of coercive or reward based ‘career’ or ‘commodity’ incentives ‘lures’ or ‘traps’, providing ‘recognition of the self as continuously improving’ (Roberts, 2005, p.629). But these traps demand that we retain a ‘strong interest in control not just of the self but of others...to win their recognition through our own or their subordination, or more typically both’ (ibid, p. 637). One understanding of this situation is that individuals try to mitigate these anxieties through highly revered positions (Jensen, 2006; Gill, 2015; Brown and Coupland, 2015), where success is calculated almost exclusively through masculine ‘hyper-intense fantasies’ (Ekman, 2013, p.7) of accumulating material and symbolic wealth, coupled with masculine and middle class ideas of career progression (Pullen and Rhodes, 2014; Clarke and Knights, 2015), and/ or celebrity status (Currid-Halkett, 2010). As such we remain trapped in this narcissistic (Lasch, 1979; Sennett, 1977) *idée fixe* that serves to repress us in our self-disciplined attempts to achieve goals that are often just beyond our reach (Costea et al., 2012). As a means of ameliorating some of these challenges arising from some identity research, and by way of suggesting new avenues to explore, we now go off-road to enter terra nova; a more engaged and embodied approach to theorising identity.

## **Driven back to the Body**

Dominant among organizational scholars is the central interest ‘in subjective identities as construed through discourse and other symbolic means’ (Brown, 2015, p.21), with claims that ‘taking languaging seriously enables researchers to begin to unravel the complexities of the processes of identity formation and construction’, although ‘this is not to imply that “identity” is nothing *but* talk and text’ (Ybema et al. 2009, p.303/304). Unfortunately, much of the literature that has focused on discourse has failed to interrogate the self-defeating preoccupation with identity as a source of security and we have criticized what we describe as their myopia and amnesia in neglecting authors (e.g. Becker, Clough, Knights and Willmott, Watts) who have refused to see identity as synonymous with commonsense. Equally this myopia has led to a neglect of the body or embodied notions of identity.

That there has been an absence of the body is perhaps understandable given how the linguistic turn (Judovitz, 2001) has rendered the symbolic, language and discourse dominant within social science generally, and within the identity literature in particular (Kenny et al., 2011). Although important to understand the interpersonal as well as the discursive aspects (McInnes and Corlett, 2012, p. 28), the literature has tended to neglect the exploration of identity in relation to our embodied engagement with others (Gatens, 1996; Braidotti, 2013). This neglect is evident in three recent journal special issues on identity in *Organization* (Beech, 2008; Watson, 2008), *Human Relations* (Clarke et al., 2009; Costas and Fleming, 2009; Down and Reveley, 2009; Watson, 2009), and *The Scandinavian Journal of Management* where the ‘principal concern is subjectively construed discursive identities’ (Coupland and Brown, 2012, p.1), discourse (Clarke et al., 2012; Ybema et al., 2012); conversations (McInnes and Corlett, 2012); and narratives (Beech et al., 2012; Mallett and Wapshott, 2012).

Unfortunately this almost exclusive tendency to logocentricism means that many organizational scholars constitute the self in ways that appear to deny, even erase the body, or at the very least present

identity as an almost exclusively linguistic phenomenon, concerned only with self-conscious, cognitive and disembodied processes. Consequently, the body and materiality are displaced, resulting in a problem of myopia recognized by the editors of this special issue when they invited scholars ‘to look beyond ‘talk’ to examine the literature and ‘future direction that studies of embodied performance of identity might take’ (Corlett, et al., 2015). Revisiting earlier literature could help us create a future in which identity is theorized not only as discursive and symbolic, but also as embodied and material, though we are not so much proposing something new as prompting each other to acknowledge its importance. For example, Watts reminds us that ‘we know the world in terms of the body’ (Watts, 1966, p.100), while according to Spinoza ‘consciousness is by its nature the locus of an illusion’ (Deleuze, 1988, p. 19) since it is more a reflection of unconscious desires to sustain life. We do this through our social and material relations that affect, and are affected by us in terms of joyful passion as well as sadness, depending on whether the affect is adding to, or subtracting from, our being (Spinoza, 1677/1883). Identity is often, although need not be, trapped in consciousness to bypass embodied being, and the ethics immanent to its encounters with others,

I can see no sense in restricting the definition of “myself” to the process of conscious attention, volition and symbolization. I must admit my whole body to the definition of “myself,” (Watts, 1970)

The denial of the body appears stranger when we consider how one of the most important signifiers of identity is the body itself (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004). Even before exchanging a single syllable with another human we explore and assemble a number of aspects of their ‘identity’ through the body, for example gender, age, aesthetic appearance, height, colour of skin, approximate weight, style of dress, and endless other features. Indeed, in everyday Western life there is an extreme preoccupation with the

pursuit of idealized masculine and feminine bodies, undertaken through ‘comparative work’ in relation to Others. Despite this, in most organizational literature, and particularly in relation to identities, the body and other aspects of materiality are significant by their absence (Knights, 2015), mainly because of the presence (and dominance) afforded to language and discourse (Judovitz, 2001) and by ‘the excessively theoretical approach to the body’ in research (Wainwright and Turner, 2006a, p.535). However, Watts reminds us of what was known almost 70 years ago, but seems to have been forgotten,

we have been taught to neglect, despise, and violate our bodies, and to put all faith in our brains... This corresponds to the split between “I” and “me,” [and] man and nature (Watts, 1951, p.58)

Inspired partly by posthumanist feminists (e.g. Butler, 1993; Gatens, 1996; Gatens and Lloyd, 1999; Grosz, 1994; 2005; Bordo, 2000; Braidotti, 2011), there has been a gathering momentum that seeks to remedy the absent body<sup>iv</sup>, but these studies are largely outside of the identity literature (Mol, 2002; Fotaki, 2012; Fotaki et al., 2014; Pullen and Rhodes, 2014; Kenny and Fotaki, 2015). Even with a myriad of studies about different occupations, attention paid to the physical body of the worker has been largely eschewed, with few exceptions (Mol, 2002; Coupland, 2015; Hancock, et al., 2015). Other articles may allude to the body or provide a hint of a focus when, for example, Tomkins and Eatough talk about ‘the interplay between self, body and story in the way that people make sense of their organizational worlds’ (2014, p. 6), but still do not provide an embodied analysis of identity where mind and body are inseparable, nor attempt to challenge the conditions and consequences of our attachments to identity in the way that we seek to do in this article. This is the case even in literature that specifically studies bodies at work, for example, when Leonard writes about identity in relation to



doctors and nurses (2003) she limits its focus to discourse, and in Tyler's (2011) analysis of sex workers, she eschews the body in attending to other important issues such as space, sexuality and abjection.

The rising interest in aesthetic labour touches more specifically on the commodification and colonisation of the body as corporate capital (Tyler and Abbott, 1998; Wolkowitz, 2006), but still there is a need to problematise, rather than just reinforce, the preoccupation with self/body as 'aspects of aesthetic labour may obscure or detract from the affective, embodied and material dimensions of their labour' (Harvey et al. (2014, p.456). Elsewhere, in taking a less myopic look outside of organization studies, Leder's work on the *Absent Body* (1990) became the impetus for a plethora of studies claiming to have restored the body to sociology (e.g. Crossley, 2001; Featherstone and Turner, 1995; Turner, 1996) and yet these have also been 'chastised for privileging theorizing, of bracketing out the individual, and for ignoring the practical experiences of embodiment', rather than seeking to 'illuminate relationships between the body, self, society and culture' (Wainwright and Turner, 2006b, p.238/240).

In writing about Organizational Identity, Harquail and Wilcox King acknowledge the 'theoretical limitations of the Cartesian assumptions of mind-body dualisms', and advocate going 'beyond the abstractions that an individual can verbalize' (2010, p.1620). This paper highlights how essentialist, social constructionist and linguistic-discursive identity frameworks all 'privilege verbal articulations and abstract processing and pay little to no overt attention to embodied knowing' (p.1629). However, their view of "embodied cognition" seems to reinforce the very dualisms they seek to avert insofar as they create a division, and privilege work done by the brain and knowledge gained via the body, as if these can be somehow divorced from one another. However, they do highlight an important topic in organizational studies since workers' occupational histories become inscribed on their bodies

‘only then to be regenerated through the embodied work and competence of the body’ (Crossley, 2001, p.106; Mol, 2002). Harquail and Wilcox King (also invite ‘scholars in all traditions of Organizational Identity research to bring the full body of the organization member back into consideration’ (2010, p.1629/p.1631).

Although we are sceptical that it was ever there in the first place, we wholeheartedly agree that a more embodied approach to theorising identity at work would mitigate some serious, even dangerous, implications in relation to our own bodies and the way that we construct the Other, not least because when we consider characteristics of the body we confer specific associations/attributes on them; stereotypical identities that are potentially racist, sexist, or ageist. Here we are not simply concerned with ‘political correctness’, but how constituting the other enforces dualistic tendencies, which tend to privilege white over black, masculinity over femininity, or the new/ young over the old/ elderly (Knights, 2015). Departing from a view of relational, processual and dynamic possibilities, this tends instead to essentialise and reify whole swathes of people by assigning them fixed attributes and specific identities in society so that identities then ‘become hardened or reified’ into what seems like “properties” that exist outside of the human realm’ (Kenny et al., 2011, p.130),

In the act of putting everything at a distance so as to describe and control it, we have orphaned ourselves ...from our own bodies (Watts,1966, p.105)

Relatedly, while work in western society has generally been considered as one of the major sources of identity, historically it has tended to be heavily gendered and masculine in its design. To clarify, we ‘understand gender not as the natural properties of biological men and women, but as the socially produced pattern of meanings that distinguish the masculine from the feminine’ (Pullen and Rhodes, 2008, p.7). It has also been argued that redemption of the body is dependent on ‘the truth of the

masculine principle' being brought into harmony with 'the corresponding truth of the feminine principle' (Levin, 1985, p. 58). Whilst challenging the idea of a single principle rather than a multiplicity of diverse perceptions and practices surrounding gender difference, we do believe that masculine ideals are often predicated on 'control, conquest, and competitive success' that seem to accompany our instrumental pursuits and beliefs in 'self-mastery' (Knights and Kerfoot, 2004, p. 432) so here we begin to see a link between the problem of disembodiment/masculinity and our earlier discussions around failing to interrogate identity at work. For self-mastery, or indeed masterly control over others (Pullen and Rhodes, 2008) implies a focus on, or narcissist preoccupation with oneself. This precludes a commitment to, and respect for, diversity and difference (Diprose, 1994), or an exploration of our embodied and ethical engagement with others, as endorsed by posthumanist feminists (e.g. Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2011; Pullen and Rhodes, 2014).

Recently, a special issue in *Organization* claims that embodiment and affect can become the catalyst for,

a radical politics, which challenges gendered oppression in organizations and which affirms a life beyond the suffocating constraints that gender can impose (Pullen et Al., 2017, p.107)

Without an embodied approach, everything is transformed into an object, moving towards a 'logical control of the world' (Negri, 2004, p. 4) in which there is every possibility of a 'destruction of being'. This is especially visible in the field of management where personal life, family, and even physical and mental health are subordinated to the 'greater' goals of conquest, mastery, and competitive material and symbolic success. These sacrifices in the name of organizational survival also maintain images of masculine managerial selves, pursuing strategies of 'ordering the world' around an illusory stable and

secure identity (Game, 1990; Clough, 1992) that revolves around an elite, narcissistic and exclusive mode of social bonding (Knights and Tullberg, 2012).

We see gender as significant in the way that identity is often discussed (or not discussed), where women are ‘subsumed by their collective identities as reproductive and sexualized bodies, in a manner which does not apply to men’ (Gatrell, 2008, p.14), and that may constrain their chances of equality in recruitment, promotion, pay and many other matters. We acknowledge, of course, that many organizational scholars have been writing about issues of gender at work for many years, albeit usually outside of ‘identity’ research (e.g. Cockburn, 1984; Acker, 1990), yet still there is a prevailing myopia whereby bodies are presumed to be neutral or ‘genderless and homogenised’ (Linstead and Thomas, 2002, p.15),

‘Man is the model and it is his body that is taken for the human body’ (Gatens, 1996, p.24).

Recently, however, there has been a call for *writing*, and not just the content related to this topic to become more embodied, to go beyond linguistic and symbolic explanations to find a way of ‘writing from the body that overcomes inequalities’ (Fotaki, 2012, p.1241). This can be used for the purposes of exposing how ‘gendered scripts are written and carved on bodies and psyches and how these have implications for the lived experiences of women (and, we will argue, men) in organizations’ (ibid, p.1251). Of course, this is no easy task for as writers we are ‘using words to dispel the illusion of language while employing one of the languages that generates them’ (Watts, 1966, p.57), so by definition ineffability tends to confound text,

Since affect is excess, it escapes discursive capture and naming. In other words, it is about an aspect of bodily experience that eludes interpretation by language. (Fotaki et al., 2017, p.4)

Although currently in its foetal stage, more embodied forms of writing (Pullen, 2006; Fotaki et al. 2014; Phillips et al. 2014) about identity, including a departure from prescriptive logocentric and fantastical accounts of research could, we believe, offer an excellent and rich seam of study to be enjoyed in the future by producing engaged and diverse accounts of our lives at work.

While the treatment of age, ethnicity and sexuality are also highly relevant for any discussion of identity (Esser and Benschops, 2009; Rumens and Kerfoot, 2009; Pullen and Thanem, 2010; Riach and Cutcher, 2014), a fuller discussion is beyond the scope of this article. However, we argue that the issues of identity and embodiment already discussed are fundamental to providing a more nuanced understanding of how persistent inequalities at work (and wider society) construct marginalised Others out of difference. In privileging particular values and ideas relating to this kind of person, or that kind of person, this difference can facilitate social exclusion and a lack of care for the Other (Diprose, 1994, 2002; Ziarek, 2001). This myopic interpretation of what it means to be human ensures that unequal power relationships remain intact, and unresolved; an elevation of individualistic, competitive material and symbolic success over ethical and embodied engagement (Pullen and Rhodes, 2014).

As we have intimated, by embracing Spinoza's radical and affirmative sense of being, a challenge can be mobilized, for his political thought traverses the theory of natural right in order to deny its two fundamental principles: individualism and the contract (Negri, 2004 p.24). As such we might refuse the ontological and political separations between subjects and objects and between individuals and society, which have resulted in individualizing strategies that serve to isolate subjects and fragment communities (ibid.). This challenge embraces a posthumanist feminist ethics that is concerned to care for and engage with the lived experience of the other, however different (Diprose, 1994; 2002; Ziarek, 2001; Pullen and Rhodes, 2014). One of our central arguments has been that the preoccupation with identity renders this ethics of engagement with difference problematic, since identity is often threatened

by ‘the mere presence of the other’ (Ziarek, 2001, p. 74), but this could be otherwise, and partly for this reason, it is necessary to ground ‘the ethical (and the ethico-political in particular) in bodies, in the materiality of desire’ (Negri, 2013, p.17).

## **Summary and Conclusion**

In our review of the MOS literature, we have found that identity is often not problematized because of its tendency to be taken for granted as a self-contained given (e.g. Beech et al., 2012; Ybema et al., 2009; Gill, 2015; Hoyer and Steyaert, 2015). Furthermore, even when explored, individuals’ preoccupation with, or attachment to, identity is rarely challenged. Partly this may be because the attachment that we all have to our own identities stops us from treating it as anything other than normal, much like the air we breathe. It is also the case that at times, academics tend to treat identity in the same way as do lay persons, even though for the former it constitutes a topic for academic study while for the latter it ordinarily represents a resource in managing everyday life. Of course, academics are not only analysts, and in practice may also behave in a commonsense way with respect to identity, thus treating it unproblematically and sometimes instrumentally as a way of seeking to overcome insecurities (Knights and Clarke, 2014). However, when some authors comment on the fragility or precariousness of identity whereby it ‘appears to be either a momentary achievement or a resilient fiction’ (Ybema et al., 2009, p.301), they often neglect to theorize *why* this might be the case.

In addition, where discourses on identity are embedded in subject (agency) - object (society) ontologies that give precedence either to voluntarist or determinist epistemologies, and a politics in which one or other side of binary relations is privileged hierarchically (Knights, 2015), neither the desire for a secure self or its often-contradictory outcomes tend to be questioned. Moreover, these ontological, epistemological and political leanings invariably result in cognitive or discursive accounts

in which the body is neglected or displaced, such that identity is treated in a wholly disembodied manner.

We understand that in criticizing the omissions and flaws evident in the work of others, we are likely to have committed similar errors to those we criticize. Although this may be lamentable, Derridean (1995) notions of responsibility indicate that it is impossible for it to be otherwise, since when we talk of one thing we must necessarily neglect another, so that we can never wholly justify any choices or decisions. It has not been our intention to provide an exhaustive review of the identity literature, for such an aspiration would be equally as self-defeating as other (masculine inspired) totalizing desires, narratives or projects. However, in this necessarily selective presentation of a range of texts, it has been our aim to provoke scholars into remembering what has gone before, to move beyond treating identity as a taken for granted resource towards a view that it is a conceptually complicated yet embodied set of ideas that always require interrogation. If, in the future, we can peer beyond the myopic confines of using identity as a novel panacea (since it is neither new, or a cure-all), then we might begin to address these problems of ‘underspecification’ that have prevented analyses of identity from realising their potential. We believe that our forgetfulness and shortsightedness is one of the reasons for this ‘lack’, as well as a tendency for analysis to be disembodied and hence dualistic, whereby minds and cognitions perpetually deride or displace our bodies. This reflects the dominant masculine norms in discourse and deflects the kind of interrogation of identity that we have sought to invoke here. Consequently, we have looked backwards historically and sideways to other disciplines for insights that can assist us in moving more positively towards the generation of insights that could guide future research on identities.

Relatedly, it is important to recognize that the ‘constitution of identity is always an act of power’ (Laclau, 1990, p.33) because identity is predicated on a *hierarchically* defined order, whereby

the ‘marked’ term ‘woman’, ‘black’ or ‘old’ is subordinated to the unmarked term ‘man’, ‘white’ or ‘young’, and thus they are often embedded in a ‘violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles’ (Laclau, 1990, p. 33). Embodied thinking and practice alone may not reverse this since co-optation is always available to power, and a major reason why Foucault resisted talking too much about resistance (Sheridan, 1980). However, as is often the case in social movements (Graeber, 2009), we can avoid this co-optation of resistance by becoming less instrumental and adversarial in our politics, simply being embodied and engaged, not as a means-to- an-end, but as an end in itself (Springer, 2016). This kind of engagement coincides with what has recently been described as the ‘affective turn’ (Clough, 2008; 2010; Wetherell, 2015) where, drawing on the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Spinoza, attention is given to the virtual forces that lie behind action insofar as affectivity is prior to the individualized subject, yet might connect ‘the striving of the human being to maintain its mode of identity with the embodied basis of (human) life’ (Hansen, 2004, p. 250 quoted in Clough, 2008, p. 8). While affect may provide a link between the body and the identity of the subject as constituted through power (Foucault, 1982), it also resonates with our concerns to diminish both the theoretical and everyday preoccupation with the attachment to identity.

We have argued that it should be impossible to divorce any discussion of identity from the body and discursive practices of diversity, even though there has been insufficient space to do this comprehensively in a review article; however, we can outline what might be a starting framework for such a future enterprise, which also serves to summarise our contribution. A first step we have attempted is to challenge the tendency to take identity for granted rather than interrogate it, because this enables us to engage with the ephemeral and impermanent conditions and consequences of its (re)production. Historically, as we have seen, identity or the concern for social recognition has been associated with freedom and wellbeing and idealized (Hegel, 1807) as an ideology in contemporary



Western society (Cederström and Spicer, 2015). Yet we see freedom and wellbeing as equally precarious and transitory as identity, only ever to be glimpsed in inexpressible, ineffable, brief moments. There are, of course, many obstacles in the way of engaging with this impermanence, not least of which are entrenched attachments to identities, whether they be those of work and occupation, gender, age, race, sexuality, and ethnicity or the nation state.

A second step that we have sought to explore is the way that MOS scholars often produce quite individualistic and disembodied analyses, sometimes drawing specifically on discourses and practices of masculinity. Here the attachment to humanistic notions invariably means seeking to construct the world as orderly, stable and predictable so as to attain the image of a secure masculine self (Clough, 1992). This is because we treat identity as a resource for securing a future where humans desire and aspire to attaining a position ‘higher, better, or nobler than the one they currently occupy’ (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009, p.356), an ideal that is futile since even if desirable, it is a future that can never be realised. Why? Because it is self-defeating insofar as it is ‘a constantly retreating phantom, and the faster you chase it, the faster it runs ahead’ (Watts, 1951, p.56). As such, in writing about both identity and identity work we must interrogate the underlying assumptions rather than reproducing them, for as Ekman advises ‘the best defence against this kind of domination’ is in attempting ‘to establish an ethical struggle against the ideological logic of replacing one fantasy with another’ (2013, p.19), a process of continually replacing (‘failed’) projects with new ones, with never ending optimism that this will be ‘the one’ to secure our present and future sense of self.

In identity studies, we also believe that constructing the individual as somehow divorced from his/her own body is problematic for developing knowledge, because it pretends the absence of what cannot be denied – ageing, decay and finitude (Becker, 1973). Similarly, we feel that constantly separating the individual from the social, with talk of ‘internal’ worlds versus ‘external’ worlds, and

claims that identity provides a bridging mechanism between the two (e.g. Ybema et al., 2009) is equally problematic, for how can the individual be anything other than social? By reinforcing this artificial separation between the two, it is the case that we (albeit unconsciously) legitimise the individual in privileging his/herself over society in ways that are seemingly desirable but impossible and potentially dangerous. What we have been concerned to accomplish in this article is a revival of studies that are far from their sell-by date, to challenge the way that everyday commonsense reflects and reinforces subjective attachments to identity as a means of seeking to fulfil the desire for security and stability. Moreover, it could be that our attachments to identity preclude us from a ceaseless self-questioning that challenges conventional orthodoxies including those concerning identity (Knights, 2015). For such conceptions sustain false separations between mind and body, individual and society, self and other, as well as human and non-human. Instead we have argued for a sense of identity as embodied, such that we are no longer wholly dependent on the social approval of others to confirm the sense of who we are, because *being* in the world is its own verisimilitude.

Lastly, in future studies of identity at work we exhort scholars to put aside their amnesiac and myopic tendencies regarding earlier theoretical contributions by retracing and recollecting the genealogical footprint. For example, when managerialist/functionalist perspectives talk about working on our identities to ‘enhance’ our careers, which at face value seem plausible and even compelling, our scepticism should be alerted to problematise this narrow and myopic preoccupation with ourselves. For such ideals only lead to compulsive behaviour that encourages us to find meaning in our own subjection, fixating on ‘securing the self both materially and symbolically’ (Clarke and Knights, 2015, p.1879). As we have shown, these uncritical interpretations of identity are common, partly as a result of their *ahistorical* treatment, but our collective responsibility in recognising them is all the more salient because identity is ‘connected to nearly every topic in organization and management studies’ (Brown,

2015, p.24). This is especially the case for ‘identity work’, claiming to be the ‘dominant metaphor’ in organization studies (Brown, 2015, p.25), but one that has failed to interrogate its own limitations as ‘a story telling exercise’ (Clegg et al., 2007, p.508), or thinly veiled conscious/unconscious narcissism (Pullen and Rhodes, 2008). We believe there are implications when authors neglect to theorise identity along the road, and so we end our travels with an invitation to open up new avenues for discussion, by remembering what has been forgotten. In short, by constantly working on our identities in this way or that way, through this means or that means, achieving the security we earnestly desire remains a futile project, and one potentially keeping us on the road to nowhere, for the more we seek to secure ourselves, the more it will result in cul-de-sacs of disappointment, contradiction and pain (Watts, 1951).

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<sup>i</sup>We thank the special issue guest editor Peter McInnes for encouraging us to develop this in the R&R.

<sup>ii</sup> Retrograde amnesia is where pre-existing memories are lost to conscious recollection. This does of course assume that this knowledge was already there at some point, which in this case we can never know. This has led to some debate between the authors as to whether the issue is forgetting, ignoring or never having read these earlier literatures.

<sup>iii</sup> This has its parallel in physics where Heisenberg understood electrons only to exist when in interaction with other objects in an atomic field (Rovelli, 2014: 15).

<sup>iv</sup> This has been described as an ‘absent presence’ (Leder, 2000:7) because while the body is absent from discourses, it cannot be denied in the practices to which these refer.